

— *A Spiritual Classic* —

LIBERATION  
IN THE  
PALM OF  
YOUR HAND

PABONGKA RINPOCHE



A CONCISE DISCOURSE ON THE  

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PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Edited by Trijang Rinpoche  
*Translated by Michael Richards*

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♦ ♦ OF YOUR HAND ♦ ♦

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A CONCISE DISCOURSE ON THE PATH  
TO ENLIGHTENMENT

NEW REVISED EDITION

*Pabongka Rinpoche*

Edited in the Tibetan by Trijang Rinpoche

*Translated into English by Michael Richards*

Including a memoir of Pabongka Rinpoche by Rilbur Rinpoche



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## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

IN 1921, some seven hundred Tibetan monks, nuns, and lay people gathered at Chuzang Hermitage, near Lhasa, to receive a *lamrim* discourse from the renowned teacher, Kyabje Pabongka Rinpoche. For the next twenty-four days they listened to what has become one of the most famous teachings ever given in Tibet.

The term *lamrim*—steps on the path to enlightenment—refers to a group of teachings that have developed in Tibet over the past millennium based on the concise, seminal text, *A Lamp on the Path*, by the great Indian master Atiśha (Dīpaṅkara Śhrījñāna, 982–1054). In some ways, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* represents the culmination of the lamrim tradition in Tibet.

Over 2,500 years ago, Śhākyamuni Buddha spent about forty-five years giving a vast array of teachings to an enormous variety of people. He did not teach from some predetermined syllabus but according to the spiritual needs of his listeners. Hence any individual studying the Buddha's collected works would find it extremely difficult to discern a clear path that he or she could put into practice. The importance of Atiśha's lamrim was that he put the Buddha's teachings into logical order, delineating a step-by-step arrangement that could be understood and practiced by whoever wanted to follow the Buddhist path, irrespective of his or her level of development.

Not only did Atiśha rely on what the Buddha himself taught, he also brought with him to Tibet the still-living oral traditions of those teachings—the unbroken lineages of both method and wisdom, which had passed from the Buddha to Maitreya and Mañjuśhrī respectively, and then on down through Asaṅga, Nāgārjuna and many other great Indian scholars to Atiśha's own spiritual masters. Thus as well as writing the first lamrim text, Atiśha also conveyed these extremely important oral traditions,

which still exist today, and are being transmitted to Westerners through contemporary lamas such as His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.

Atiṣha's disciples formed a school known as the Kadam, most of whose traditions were absorbed into the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, which was founded by the great Tsongkapa (1357–1419). Many Kadam and Gelug lamas wrote lamrim commentaries, and the most famous was Tsongkapa's master work, the *Great Stages of the Path (Lamrim Chenmo)*. Pabongka Rinpoche followed the general outline of this text in the 1921 discourse that was to become *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*. However, while Tsongkapa's work has a more scholarly emphasis, Kyabje Pabongka's focuses on the needs of practitioners. It goes into great detail on such subjects as how to prepare for meditation, guru yoga, and the development of *bodhichitta*. Thus *Liberation* is a highly practical text.

Among those present in 1921 was Kyabje Trijang Dorje Chang (1901–81), one of Pabongka Rinpoche's closest disciples, and later Junior Tutor to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and root guru of many of the Gelug lamas who fled Tibet in 1959. Trijang Rinpoche took notes at the teachings, and over the next thirty-seven years edited them painstakingly until they were ready to be published in Tibetan as *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand (rNam grol lag bcangs)*.

Pabongka Rinpoche was probably the most influential Gelug lama of this century, holding all the important lineages of sūtra and tantra and passing them on to most of the important Gelug lamas of the next two generations; the list of his oral discourses is vast in depth and breadth. He was also the root guru of Kyabje Ling Rinpoche (1903–83), Senior Tutor of the Dalai Lama, Trijang Rinpoche, and many other highly respected teachers. His collected works occupy fifteen large volumes and cover every aspect of Buddhism. If you have ever received a teaching from a Gelug lama, you have been influenced by Pabongka Rinpoche.

There are four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and all have lamrim-style teachings, but the Nyingma, Sakya and Kagyu schools do not emphasize the lamrim as does the Gelug. Although generally in the Gelug monastic curriculum the lamrim is not taught to the monks until quite late in their careers, it is often the first teaching given to Westerners. And *Liberation* has been the lamrim that Gelug masters teach most.

In his brief introduction, Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche conveys a strong sense of what it was like to be there. Indeed, this text is unusual among Tibetan works in that it is the edited transcript of an oral discourse, not a

literary composition. Hence not only do we receive some very precious teachings—the essence of the eight key lamrims—but we also gain insight into how such discourses were given in Tibet. The points that detail the special features of this teaching may be found in Trijang Rinpoche's introduction and at the end of Day 1.

Each chapter corresponds to a day's teaching and usually begins with a short talk to set the motivation of the listeners. In the book, the motivations have been abbreviated in favor of new material, but the remarkable first chapter, Day 1, is both an elaborate motivation and an excellent glance meditation on the entire lamrim. In a sense, the rest of the book is a commentary on this chapter. As Pabongka Rinpoche makes clear throughout, dedicating ourselves to the development of bodhichitta is the most meaningful way of directing our lives, and the graded realizations summarized in Day 1 lead us to that goal. At the end of the book, Pabongka Rinpoche says, "Practice whatever you can so that my teachings will not have been in vain... But above all, make bodhichitta your main practice."

These teachings contain much that is new and unfamiliar, especially for Westerners, but as with any meaningful pursuit, study and reflection lead to clarity and understanding.

## A NOTE ON THIS TRANSLATION

I have tried to make this translation as readable as possible without sacrificing accuracy, but since Trijang Rinpoche was a poet of renown, there can be no doubt that some of the beauty of the Tibetan text has been lost. To help Western readers, I have presented the structural hierarchy of the material in a way that Tibetan books do not: the outline of these headings and subheadings is clearly displayed in appendix 1 and serves as an elaborate table of contents.

I have not translated all the technical terms, preferring to leave the Sanskrit word where there is no suitable English equivalent. This is preferable to concocting some English term that may be even less familiar to the reader than the Sanskrit, and new Sanskrit Buddhist words are entering English dictionaries all the time.

In the main body of the text, all Tibetan words and proper names are in phonetics only; their transliterations are in the glossary. Sanskrit transliteration is standard except that *ś* is written as *sh*, *ṣ* as *sh*, *c* as *ch*, *ṛ* as *ri*, and *ḷ* and *ḻ* to assist readers in pronunciation.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I also thank my many friends and colleagues in Dharamsala for their help, encouragement, and support: Losang Gyatso, Geshe Dhargyey's translator at the time, for suggesting I translate this book; Gyatsho Tshering and his staff at the Tibetan Library; all at Delek Hospital and Jean-Pierre Urolixes and Mervyn Stringer for their help after my road accident in 1983; David Stuart, who retrieved the draft translation of Days 9 and 10 from Jammu, where it finished up after the accident; Cathy Graham and Jeremy Russell, who offered valuable suggestions to improve the manuscript; my mother and late father, who have always helped and supported me; Alan Hanlay, Lisa Heath, and Michael Perrott; my late friends Keith Kevan and Andy Brennand; and my dear wife, Angela, who shared with me all the pain that this lengthy project brought and kept her patience and hope throughout; her encouragement and sacrifice were beyond measure.

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Finally, many thanks to Chris Haskett, who spent three years checking my poor translation with the original under the supervision of John Dunne, and to David Kittelstrom for his guiding hand and editorial wisdom, making this new edition possible.

# PABONGKA RINPOCHE

A MEMOIR BY RILBUR RINPOCHE

MY GURU, kind in three ways, who met face to face with Heruka, whose name I find difficult to utter, Lord Pabongka Vajradhara Dechen Nyingpo Pael Zangpo, was born north of Lhasa in 1878. His father was a minor official, but the family was not wealthy. Although the night was dark, a light shone in the room, and people outside the house had a vision of a protector on the roof.

Pabongka Rinpoche was an emanation of the great scholar Changkya Rolpai Dorje (1717–86), although initially it was thought that he was the reincarnation of a learned Khampa geshe from Sera Mae Monastery. Rinpoche entered the monastery at the age of seven, did the usual studies of a monk, earned his geshe degree, and spent two years at Gyuetoe Tantric College.

His root guru was Dagpo Lama Rinpoche Jampael Lhuendrub Gyatso, from Lhoka. He was definitely a bodhisattva, and Pabongka Rinpoche was his foremost disciple. He lived in a cave in Pasang, and his main practice was bodhichitta. His main deity was Avalokiteshvara, and he would recite 50,000 *manis* [the mantra, *om mani padme hum*] every night. When Kyabje Pabongka first met Dagpo Rinpoche at a *tsog* offering ceremony in Lhasa, he cried from beginning to end out of reverence.

When Pabongka Rinpoche had finished his studies, he visited Dagpo Lama Rinpoche in his cave and was sent into a lamrim retreat nearby. Dagpo Lama Rinpoche would teach him a lamrim topic and then Pabongka Rinpoche would go away and meditate on it. Later he would return to explain what he'd understood: if he had gained some realization, Dagpo Lama Rinpoche would teach him some more, and Pabongka Rinpoche would go back and meditate on that. It went on like this for ten years (and if that's not amazing, what is!).

Pabongka Rinpoche's four main disciples were Kyabje Ling Rinpoche, Kyabje Trijang Rinpoche, Khangsar Rinpoche, and Tathag Rinpoche, who was a regent of Tibet. Tathag Rinpoche was the main teacher of His Holiness the Dalai Lama when he was a child and gave him his novice ordination.

I was born in Kham, in Eastern Tibet, and two of my early teachers were disciples of Pabongka Rinpoche, so I was brought up in an atmosphere of complete faith in Pabongka Rinpoche as the Buddha himself. One of these teachers had a picture of Pabongka Rinpoche that exuded small drops of nectar from between the eyebrows. I saw this with my own eyes, so you can imagine how much faith I had in Rinpoche when I finally came into his presence.

But I also had a personal reason for having great faith in him. I was the only son of an important family, and although the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had recognized me as an incarnate lama and Pabongka Rinpoche himself had said I should join Sera Monastery in Lhasa, my parents were not happy about this. However, my father died soon after this, and I was finally able to set out for Central Tibet. Can you imagine my excitement as I embarked on horseback on the two-month voyage? I was only fourteen, and becoming a monk really was the thing to do for a fellow my age. I felt that the opportunity to go to Lhasa to get ordained and live as a *rinpoche* as the Dalai Lama had said I should was all the wondrous work of Pabongka Rinpoche.

At the time of my arrival in Lhasa, Pabongka Rinpoche was living at Tashi Choeling, a cave above Sera Monastery. We made an appointment, and a few days later my mother, my *changdzoe* (the man in charge of my personal affairs), and I rode up on horseback. Although Rinpoche was expecting us that day, we had not arranged a time. Nevertheless, he had just had his own *changdzoe* prepare tea and sweet rice, which freshly awaited our arrival. This convinced me that Rinpoche was clairvoyant, a manifestation of the all-seeing Vajradhara himself.

After we had eaten, it was time to visit Rinpoche. I remember this as if it were today. A narrow staircase led up to Pabongka Rinpoche's tiny room, where he was sitting on his bed. He looked just like his pictures—short and fat! He said, "I knew you were coming—now we have met," and stroked the sides of my face. While I was sitting there, a new *geshe* from Sera came in to offer Rinpoche a special *tsampa* dish that is made only at the time of receiving the *geshe* degree. Rinpoche remarked how auspicious



it was that this new geshe had come while I was there and had him fill my bowl just like his own. You can imagine what that did to my mind!

The room had almost nothing in it. The most amazing thing was a pure gold, two-inch statue of Dagpo Lama Rinpoche, Pabongka Rinpoche's root guru, surrounded by a circle of tiny offerings. Behind Rinpoche were five tangkas of Khaedrub Je's visions of Tsongkapa after he had passed away. The only other thing in the room was a place for a cup of tea. I could also see a small meditation room off to the side and kept peeking into it (I was only fourteen and extremely curious). Rinpoche told me to go inside and check it out. All it contained was a meditation box and a small altar. Rinpoche called out the names of the statues on the altar: from left to right there were Lama Tsongkapa, Heruka, Yamāntaka, Naeljorma, and Paelgon Dramze, an emanation of Mahākāla. Beneath the statues were offerings, set out right across the altar.

I was not yet a monk, so Rinpoche's long-time servant Jamyang, who had been given to Pabongka Rinpoche by Dagpo Lama Rinpoche and always stayed in Rinpoche's room, was sent to get a calendar to fix a date for my ordination, even though I had not asked for it. Rinpoche was giving me everything I had ever wanted, and I felt he was just too kind. When I left, I floated out on a cloud in a complete state of bliss!

Rinpoche's changdzoe was a very fierce-looking man, said to be the emanation of a protector. Once, when Rinpoche was away on a long tour, out of devotion the changdzoe demolished the old small building in which Rinpoche lived and constructed a large ornate residence rivaling the private quarters of the Dalai Lama. When Rinpoche returned he was not at all pleased and said, "I am only a minor hermit lama, and you should not have built something like this for me. I am not famous, and the essence of what I teach is renunciation of the worldly life. Therefore I am embarrassed by rooms like these."

I took lamrim teachings from Pabongka Rinpoche many times. The Chinese confiscated all my notes, but as a result of his teachings, I still carry something very special inside. Whenever he taught I would feel inspired to become a real yogi by retreating to a cave, covering myself with ashes, and meditating. As I got older I would feel this less and less, and now I don't think of it at all. But I really wanted to be a true yogi, just like him.

He gave many initiations such as Yamāntaka, Heruka, and Guhyasamāja. I myself took these from him. We would go to his residence for important secret initiations, and he would come down to the monastery to

give more general teachings. Sometimes he would go on tour to various monasteries. Visiting Pabongka Rinpoche was what it must have been like to visit Lama Tsongkapa when he was alive.

When he taught he would sit for up to eight hours without moving. About two thousand people would come to his general discourses and initiations and fewer to special teachings, but when he gave bodhisattva vows, up to ten thousand people would show up. When he gave the Heruka initiation he would take on a special appearance. His eyes became very wide and piercing, and I could almost see him as Heruka, with one leg outstretched, the other bent. It would get so intense that I would start crying, as if the deity Heruka himself were right there. It was very powerful, very special.

To my mind he was the most important Tibetan lama of all. Everybody knows how great his four main disciples were—well, he was their teacher. He spent a great deal of time thinking about the practical meaning of the teachings and coming to an inner realization of them, and he had practiced and accomplished everything he had learned, right up to the completion stage. He didn't just spout words, he tried things out for himself. Also, he never got angry; any anger had been completely pacified by his bodhi-chitta. Many times there would be long lines of people waiting for blessings, but Rinpoche would ask each one individually how they were and tap them on the head. Sometimes he dispensed medicine. He was always gentle. All this made him very special.

I would say he had two main qualities: from the tantric point of view, his realization and ability to present Heruka, and from the sūtra point of view, his ability to teach lamrim.

Just before he passed away, he was invited to explain a short lamrim at his root guru's monastery of Dagpo Shidag Ling, in Lhoka. He had chosen the text called the *Quick Path*, by the Second Pañchen Lama. This was the first lamrim that Dagpo Lama Rinpoche had taught him, and Pabongka Rinpoche had said that it would be the last he himself would teach. Whenever he visited his lama's monastery, Rinpoche would dismount as soon as it appeared in view and prostrate all the way to the door—which was not easy because of his build; when he left he would walk backward until it was out of sight. This time when he left the monastery, he made one prostration when it was almost out of sight and went to stay at a house nearby. Having manifested just a little discomfort in his stomach, Rinpoche retired for the night. He asked his attendants to leave while he did his prayers, which he

chanted louder than usual. Then it sounded like he was giving a lamrim discourse. When he had finished and his attendants went into his room, they found he had passed away. Although Tathag Rinpoche was extremely upset, he told us what to do. We were all distraught. Pabongka Rinpoche's body was clothed in brocade and cremated in the traditional way. An incredible reliquary was constructed, but the Chinese demolished it. Nevertheless, I was able to retrieve some of Rinpoche's relics from it, and I gave them to Sera Mae Monastery. You can see them there now.

I have had some success as a scholar, and as a lama I am somebody, but these things are not important. The only thing that matters to me is that I was a disciple of Pabongka Rinpoche.

*The Venerable Rilbur Rinpoche was born in Eastern Tibet in 1923. At the age of five he was recognized by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama as the sixth incarnation of Sera Mae Rilbur Rinpoche. He entered Sera Monastic University in Lhasa at fourteen and became a geshe at twenty-four. He meditated and taught Dharma until 1959, after which he suffered under intense Chinese oppression for twenty-one years. In 1980 he was allowed to perform some religious activities, and he helped build a new stūpa for Pabongka Rinpoche at Sera, the Chinese having destroyed the original. He then came to India and lived for several years at Namgyal Monastery, Dharamsala. Toward the end of his life, Rinpoche traveled several times to Western countries and lived for a period in the United States. He passed away at Sera Mae Monastery in Bylakuppe, South India, on January 15, 2006.*